

Irmo-Chapin LEADER

by Jackie Perrone

Alecia Klauk

Struggling with inadequate income for daily life is hard anywhere. Trying to make it in affluent, upscale Chapin just adds an extra level of stress for those not fortunate enough to have fat bank accounts.

That's where the We Care Center comes in. For 32 years, this haven of generosity has offered helping hands to the needy in the Chapin area as well as in Newberry County. For the past three of those years, Alecia Klauk has served as Executive Director, overseeing the agency's outreach to all who need help.

"Chapin has a reputation as an enclave of the wealthy and privileged," she says. "Plush real estate, excellent schools, a gorgeous lake, and a do-able commute into the capital city have combined to attract money and prestige to the area. It's easy to forget that only a few decades ago, much of the local population was rural, with limited education and opportunities. Many of those people are still here, living on land which may have been in their family for generations. There are no big apartment developments here, just old farmhouses among the large expensive new homes. No public transportation. No sidewalks, even. No big businesses offering employment. How are they supposed to pull up out of poverty without leaving the place of their roots? We are here to help them make ends meet."

Alecia proudly recites the history of the We Care Center, which came about through the initiative of 30 Chapin churches combining their resources to offer help to the needy. The Center is funded entirely by grants and donations, from all sources: churches, businesses, individuals, and a few agencies such as United Fund and Harvest Hope. The assistance offered includes food, utility bills, vouchers to thrift stores, and a partnership with Good Samaritan Medical Clinic. Alecia and one other full-time employee are joined by 150 dedicated volunteers, and the Center is able to offer life coaches giving nutrition education and help with such issues as job training and resume development.

Nearly 10,000 individuals served, in more than 3,000 families. 480,000 pounds of food, about \$1 Million worth, given away. Utility bills paid: almost \$100,000. Thrift Store vouchers: nearly \$6,000. These are We Care's figures for 2017.

"We are very proud to have received the Angel Award from the state Secretary of State in 2017," she says. "This is recognition for those who keep administrative costs down, maximizing the use of their funds. We earned a client-expense ratio of 93.4% - meaning that less than seven percent of our funding goes to administration. We could never do it without our wonderful volunteers."

Alecia Klauk's husband Brian is Project Engineer for the Carolina Crossroads program which is redesigning and improving South Carolina's highway system. They grew up in Irmo together and now have five teen-aged children. ■

